

African American Experiences during WWI and WWII

Discussion date: _____

Directions: Read and mark up the attached two articles. Your annotations should highlight the experiences/contributions of African Americans during WWI and WWII.

Evaluate:

1. What, if anything, was gained by African Americans during WWI and WWII?
2. How were the experiences of the African Americans similar AND different during WWI and WWII.
3. Write down two-three though provoking questions you could pose to your classmates based on the information in the attached articles.

African Americans and World War I

Chad Williams – Hamilton College

World War I was a transformative moment in African-American history. What began as a seemingly distant European conflict soon became an event with revolutionary implications for the social, economic, and political future of black people. The war directly impacted all African Americans, male and female, northerner and southerner, soldier and civilian. Migration, military service, racial violence, and political protest combined to make the war years one of the most dynamic periods of the African-American experience. Black people contested the boundaries of American democracy, demanded their rights as American citizens, and asserted their very humanity in ways both subtle and dramatic. Recognizing the significance of World War I is essential to developing a full understanding of modern African-American history and the struggle for black freedom.

When war erupted in Europe in August 1914, most Americans, African Americans included, saw no reason for the United States to become involved. This sentiment strengthened as war between the German-led Central Powers and the Allied nations of France, Great Britain, and Russia ground to a stalemate and the death toll increased dramatically. The black press sided with France, because of its purported commitment to racial equality, and chronicled the exploits of colonial African soldiers serving in the French army. Nevertheless, African Americans viewed the bloodshed and destruction occurring overseas as far removed from the immediacies of their everyday lives.

The war did, however, have a significant impact on African Americans, particularly the majority who lived in the South. The war years coincided with the Great Migration, one of the largest internal movements of people in American history.

The Great Migration

Between 1914 and 1920, roughly 500,000 black southerners packed their bags and headed to the North, fundamentally transforming the social, cultural, and political landscape of cities such as Chicago, New York, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Detroit. The Great Migration would reshape black America and the nation as a whole.

Black southerners faced a host of social, economic, and political challenges that prompted their migration to the North. The majority of black farmers labored as sharecroppers, remained in perpetual debt, and lived in dire poverty. Their condition worsened in 1915–16 as a result of a boll weevil infestation that ruined cotton crops throughout the South. These economic obstacles were made worse by social and political oppression. By the time of the war, most black people had been disfranchised, effectively stripped of their right to vote through both legal and extralegal means.

Jim Crow segregation, legitimized by the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) Supreme Court ruling, forced black people to use separate and usually inferior facilities. The southern justice system systematically denied them equal protection under the law and condoned the practice of vigilante mob violence. As an aspiring migrant from Alabama wrote in a letter to the *Chicago Defender*, "[I] am in the darkness of the south and [I] am trying my best to get out."

Wartime opportunities in the urban North gave hope to such individuals. The American industrial economy grew significantly during the war. However, the conflict also cut off European immigration and reduced the pool of available cheap labor. Unable to meet demand with existing European immigrants and white women alone, northern businesses increasingly looked to black southerners to fill the void. In turn, the prospect of higher wages and improved working conditions prompted thousands of black southerners to abandon their agricultural lives and start anew in major industrial centers. Black women remained by and large confined to domestic work, while men for the first time in significant numbers made entryways into the northern manufacturing, packinghouse, and automobile industries.

Anxious white southerners claimed that northern labor agents lulled unsuspecting black southerners to the North and into a life of urban misery. But, to the contrary, the Great Migration was a social movement propelled by black people and their desires for a better life. The *Chicago Defender*, which circulated throughout the South, implored black people to break free from their oppression and take advantage of opportunities in the North. Even more influential were the testimonials and letters of the migrants themselves. Migrants relied on informal networks of family and friends to facilitate their move to the North. Individuals would often leave to scout out conditions, secure a job, and find living arrangements, then send for the rest of their family. Word of mouth provided aspiring migrants with crucial information about where to relocate, how to get there, and how best to earn a living. This sense of community eased a black migrant's transition to city life.

Southern migrants did not always find the "promised land" they envisioned. They frequently endured residential segregation, substandard living conditions, job discrimination, and in many cases, the hostilities of white residents. Older black residents sometimes resented the presence of the new migrants, as neighborhoods became increasingly overcrowded and stigmatized as ghettos. But life in the North was nevertheless exciting and liberating. No longer subjected to the indignities of Jim Crow and the constant threat of racial violence, southern migrants experienced a new sense of freedom. Southern culture infused northern black communities with a vibrancy that inspired new forms of music, literature, and art. The Great Migration marked a significant moment in the economic, political, social, and cultural growth of modern black America.

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[The War, Democracy and Justice](#)

By early 1917, the clouds of war had reached American shores. President Woodrow Wilson initially pledged to keep the country out of the conflict, arguing that the United States had nothing to gain from involving itself in the European chaos. Wilson won reelection in 1916 on a campaign of neutrality, but a series of provocations gradually changed his position. Germany resumed unrestricted submarine warfare in the Atlantic Ocean and sank several vessels carrying American passengers. On March 1, 1917, the Zimmermann Telegram, in which Germany encouraged Mexico to enter the war on the side of the Central Powers, became public and enflamed pro-war sentiments. Wilson felt compelled to act, and on April 2, 1917, he stood before Congress and issued a declaration of war against Germany. "The world must be made safe for democracy," he boldly stated, framing the war effort as a crusade to secure the rights of democracy and self-determination on a global scale.

These words immediately resonated with many African Americans, who viewed the war as an opportunity to bring about true democracy in the United States. It would be insincere, many black people argued, for the United States to fight for democracy in Europe while African Americans remained second-class citizens. "If America truly understands the functions of democracy and justice, she must know that she must begin to promote democracy and justice at home first of all," Arthur Shaw of New York proclaimed. The black press used Wilson's pronouncement to frame the war as a struggle for African American civil rights. "Let us have a real democracy for the United States and then we can advise a house cleaning over on the other side of the water," the Baltimore *Afro-American* asserted. For African Americans, the war became a crucial test of America's commitment to the ideal of democracy and the rights of citizenship for all people, regardless of race.

The United States government mobilized the entire nation for war, and African Americans were expected to do their part. The military instituted a draft in order to create an army capable of winning the war. The government demanded "100% Americanism" and used the June 1917 Espionage Act and the May 1918 Sedition Act to crack down on dissent. Large segments of the black population, however, remained hesitant to support a cause they deemed hypocritical. A small but vocal number of African Americans explicitly opposed black participation in the war. A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, editors of the radical socialist newspaper *The Messenger*, openly encouraged African Americans to resist military service and, as a result, were closely monitored by federal intelligence agents. Many other African Americans viewed the war apathetically and found ways to avoid military service. As a black resident from Harlem quipped, "The Germans ain't done nothin' to me, and if they have, I forgive 'em."

Most African Americans nevertheless saw the war as an opportunity to demonstrate their patriotism and their place as equal citizens in the nation. Black political leaders believed that if the race sacrificed for the war effort, the government would have no choice but to reward them with greater civil rights. "Colored folks should be patriotic," the Richmond *Planet* insisted. "Do not let us be chargeable with being disloyal to the flag." Black men and women for the most part approached the war with a sense of civic duty. Over one million African Americans responded to their draft calls, and roughly 370,000 black men were

inducted into the army. Charles Brodnax, a farmer from Virginia recalled, "I felt that I belonged to the Government of my country and should answer to the call and obey the orders in defense of Democracy."

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Racial Violence and Segregated Armed Forces

Racial violence tested blacks' patriotic resolve. On July 2, 1917, in East St. Louis, tensions between black and white workers sparked a bloody four-day riot that left upwards of 125 black residents dead and the nation shocked. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) responded by holding a Silent Protest Parade in New York City on July 28, 1917. Eight thousand marchers, the men dressed in black and the women and children in white, solemnly advanced down Fifth Avenue to the sound of muffled drums and holding signs such as the one that read, *Mr. President, why not make America safe for democracy.*

Violence erupted again the following month in Houston, Texas. Black soldiers of the 3rd Battalion of the 24th Infantry, stationed at Camp Logan, had grown increasingly tired of racial discrimination and abuse from Houston's white residents and from the police in particular. On the night of August 23, 1917, the soldiers retaliated by marching on the city and killing sixteen white civilians and law enforcement personnel. Four black soldiers died as well. The Houston rebellion shocked the nation and encouraged white southern politicians to oppose the future training of black soldiers in the South. Three military court-martial proceedings convicted 110 soldiers. Sixty-three received life sentences and thirteen were hung without due process. The army buried their bodies in unmarked graves.

Despite the bloodshed at Houston, the black press and civil rights organizations like the NAACP insisted that African Americans should receive the opportunity to serve as soldiers and fight in the war. Joel Spingarn, a former chairman of the NAACP, worked to establish an officers' training camp for black candidates. "All of you cannot be leaders," he stated, "but those of you who have the capacity for leadership must be given an opportunity to test and display it." The black press vigorously debated the merits of a Jim Crow camp. W. E. B. Du Bois, the noted scholar, editor of the NAACP's journal *The Crisis*, and a close friend of Spingarn, supported the camp as a crucible of "talented tenth" black leadership, manhood, and patriotism. Black college students, particularly those at historically black institutions, were the driving force behind the camp. Howard University established the Central Committee of Negro College Men and recruited potential candidates from college campuses and black communities throughout the country. The camp opened on June 18, 1917, in Des Moines, Iowa, with 1,250 aspiring black officer candidates. At the close of the camp on October 17, 1917, 639 men received commissions, a historical first.

The military created two combat divisions for African Americans. One, the 92nd Division, was composed of draftees and officers. The second, the 93rd Division, was made up of mostly National Guard units from New York, Chicago, Washington, D.C., Cleveland, and Massachusetts. The army, however, assigned the

vast majority of soldiers to service units, reflecting a belief that black men were more suited for manual labor than combat duty. Black soldiers were stationed and trained throughout the country, although most facilities were located in the South. They had to endure racial segregation and often received substandard clothing, shelter, and social services. At the same time, the army presented many black servicemen, particularly those from the rural South, with opportunities unavailable to them as civilians, such as remedial education and basic health care. Military service was also a broadening experience that introduced black men to different people and different parts of the country.

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Women's Contributions

Black women sacrificed as well. They contributed to the war effort in significant ways and formed the backbone of African-American patriotic activities. Clubwomen, many under the auspices of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), led "liberty loan" campaigns, held rallies, and provided crucial material and emotional support for black troops. Women joined war service organizations such as the YWCA and the Red Cross as well as establishing their own groups, like the Women's Auxiliary of the New York 15th National Guard, to meet the specific needs of black soldiers.

The war also spurred an increase in political activism amongst black women. For the growing number of women who worked outside the home, the war created new opportunities for them to organize collectively and advocate for greater pay and equitable working conditions. Laundresses in the South formed associations and engaged in strikes to protest unfair treatment at the hands of their white employers. In Mobile, Alabama, for example, some 250 laundry workers walked off the job, insisting, "We are protesting against this discourteous treatment and we intend to stay out until our communications are answered and they agree to deal with our committee." Women and organizations like the NACW continued to protest against lynching and, with the suffrage movement reaching its apex, insisted upon the right of black women to vote.

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Political Leaders

The war and the pressures of patriotism tested the effectiveness of black political leaders. A number of prominent African Americans worked closely with the government both to rally black support for the war and to address issues such as lynching, segregation, and discrimination against soldiers that exacerbated black dissent. Emmett Scott, the former secretary to Booker T. Washington at the Tuskegee Institute, served as a special assistant to the Secretary of War in charge of matters related to African Americans and the war. His efforts yielded limited results. He did, however, organize a major conference of black newspaper editors and political leaders in Washington, D.C., in June 1918, which produced a statement by the attendees professing their loyalty to the government. The following month, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote

the editorial "Close Ranks," in which he stated, "Let us, while this war lasts, forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our own white fellow citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy."

Du Bois's words generated considerable controversy within the NAACP and in the pages of black newspapers across the country, due in part to the fact he was simultaneously advocating for an army captaincy in military intelligence. The controversy reflected the tension between patriotism and race loyalty many African Americans grappled with throughout the war and leaders such as Du Bois struggled to navigate effectively.

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Fighting Overseas

The war most directly impacted those African Americans called to fight and labor in the military overseas. Over 200,000 crossed the Atlantic and served in France. The majority worked in service units, broadly characterized as the Service of Supply (SOS). They dug ditches, cleaned latrines, transported supplies, cleared debris, and buried rotting corpses. The largest number of African-American SOS troops served as stevedores, working on the docks of Brest, St. Nazaire, Bordeaux, and other French port cities to load and unload crucial supplies. "I don't want to stagger under heavy boxes," one stevedore declared. "I want a gun on my shoulder and the opportunity to go to the front." It was hard work, made worse by racial discrimination, but nevertheless essential to the success of the war effort.

The two black combat divisions, the 92nd and 93rd, made up of approximately 40,000 troops, did see battle. Unsure how to use black national guardsmen, the American army "loaned" the 93rd Division to the French army. It was the only American division to serve exclusively under French command. Despite having to acclimate to French methods of combat, the division's four regiments performed exceptionally well and received numerous commendations.

The 93rd Division's 369th Infantry Regiment from New York became the most famous fighting unit of African-American troops. Nicknamed the "Harlem Hellfighters," the regiment first garnered notoriety for its world-class band, led by the acclaimed James Reese Europe and made up of top musicians from the United States and Puerto Rico. Europe's band, along with other black regimental ensembles, popularized jazz to a war-torn French nation fascinated with black culture. The 369th received equal acclaim for its combat performance. Two soldiers of the 369th, Henry Johnson and Needham Roberts, were the first American soldiers to receive the French Croix de Guerre (War Cross). The regiment served for 191 days and ceded no ground to German forces. They were the first American regiment to reach the Rhine River in Germany following the armistice and returned to the United States national heroes.

The 92nd Division, in comparison to the 93rd, had a much more harrowing experience. White army officials characterized black soldiers of the division as rapists and spread vicious lies among French civilians. African-American officers were particularly singled out for racist treatment because of their

status. Viewed as a threat to white authority, many were unjustly transferred out of the division and others were court-martialed on bogus charges. Despite inadequate training and racial discrimination, the division as a whole fought well. However, one regiment, the 368th Infantry Regiment, performed poorly during the Allied Meuse-Argonne offensive in September 1918 and was used by the military to characterize all black soldiers and officers as complete failures. African-American soldiers would contest these slanderous charges well into the postwar period.

The rigors of combat and labor challenged black soldiers' physical and emotional stamina. Nevertheless, service in France constituted a remarkable experience. African-American troops often interacted with North and West African soldiers serving in the French military, expanding their sense of diasporic belonging. Black soldiers received a warm welcome from French civilians, who, unlike white troops of the American army, exhibited little overt racism. "They treated us with respect," one soldier recalled, "not like the white American soldiers." These interactions further contributed to the image of France as a nation free of racial discrimination and uniquely committed to universal democratic rights. Travel and service in France expanded the boundaries of how black soldiers viewed the world and their place in it. Lemuel Moody, a soldier who served overseas, reflected that his experience was "altogether improving and broadening....[It] changed my out look on life. I see things now with different eyes."

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After the War

When the war ended on November 11, 1918, African Americans anxiously and optimistically hoped that their patriotic sacrifices would have a positive impact on race relations and expand the boundaries of civil rights. Political leaders attempted to exert influence on the Versailles peace proceedings. W. E. B. Du Bois organized a Pan-African Congress, held in Paris from February 19 to 21, 1919, which challenged the legitimacy of European colonialism. William Monroe Trotter of the Equal Rights League was so determined to reach Paris that, after being denied a passport by the State Department, he obtained passage as a cook and ultimately presented his case to the peace conference. International pressure was closely tied to the domestic expectations of African Americans. Homecoming parades for returning black soldiers, in the North and South, attracted thousands of people and signaled a determination to translate their service into social and political change.

On February 17, 1919, the 369th Infantry Regiment famously marched up Fifth Avenue and into Harlem before some 250,000 onlookers. A spirit of determination, inspired by the war, surged throughout black America. Du Bois voiced such sentiment in the May 1919 Crisis editorial "Returning Soldiers," declaring, "*We return. We return from fighting. We return fighting. Make way for Democracy! We saved it in France, and by the Great Jehovah, we will save it in the United States of America, or know the reason why.*"

African Americans were indeed forced to fight, quite literally, for their survival following the war. James Weldon Johnson characterized the bloody summer of 1919 as the Red Summer. Fears of labor unrest,

"bolshivism" stemming from the Russian Revolution of 1917, and the return of black soldiers spawned a nationwide surge in violence, much of it directed at African Americans. Race riots erupted in several cities, the most significant occurring in Washington, D.C., and Chicago. In October 1919, whites in Elaine, Arkansas, massacred hundreds of black people in response to the efforts of sharecroppers to organize themselves. In the South, the number of reported lynchings swelled from sixty-four in 1918 to eighty-three in 1919. At least eleven of these victims were returned soldiers. For African Americans, the end of the war brought anything but peace.

How African Americans responded to the postwar resurgence of white supremacy reflected the depths to which the aspirations of the war and expectations for democracy shaped their racial and political consciousness. The war radicalized many African Americans and deepened a commitment to combat white racial violence. At the same time, the contributions of the soldiers, as well as peoples of African descent more broadly, to the war effort swelled racial pride. Marcus Garvey tapped into this social, political, and cultural milieu. A native of Jamaica, Garvey brought his new organization, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), to New York and soon attracted thousands of followers. The UNIA, predicated upon the principles of Black Nationalism and African diasporic unity, quickly became the most dominant mass movement of the postwar era. A host of other radical organizations and newspapers complemented the UNIA and signaled the arrival of the "New Negro."

The impact of World War I on African Americans often receives less attention than the effects of the Civil War and World War II. Because racial conditions failed to improve significantly after the war, it is often viewed as a disillusioning moment. To the contrary, World War I brought about tremendous change for African Americans and their place in American society. The Great Migration transformed the demographics of black communities in the North and the South. The war effort allowed black men and women to assert their citizenship, hold the government accountable, and protest racial injustice. Military service brought thousands of black men into the army, exposed them to new lands and new people, and allowed them to fight for their country. Black people staked claim to democracy as a highly personal yet deeply political ideal and demanded that the nation live up to its potential. World War I represents a turning point in African American history, one that shaped the course of the black experience in the twentieth century.

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WORLD WAR II

Patriotism Crosses the Color Line: African Americans in World War II

by Clarence Taylor

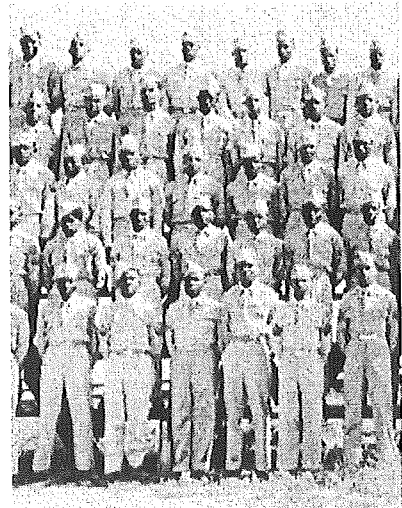
Although African Americans have been the victims of racial oppression throughout the history of the United States, they have always supported the nation, especially during wartime. When World War II erupted, over 2.5 million black men registered for the draft and one million served as draftees or volunteers in all of the branches of the Armed Forces during conflict. Most black men who served were in the Army and were relegated to segregated combat support groups. More than 12,000 black men who served in the segregated 92nd Division received citations and were decorated for their effort, and the all-black 761st Tank Battalion received the Presidential Unit Citation for "extraordinary heroism."

By 1944, 145,000 black men served in the US Army Air Force, including the 99th Fighter Squadron, popularly known as the Tuskegee Airmen. The Tuskegee Airmen became legendary for their heroic feats during the war and received a Distinguished Unit Citation, several silver stars, 150 distinguished flying crosses, fourteen bronze stars, and 744 air medals. Although the Navy put up great resistance and had only allowed blacks to serve as mess attendants, pressure from President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and civil rights organizations forced the Navy to start recruiting blacks in April 1942 for service. However, its policy of relegating blacks to segregated units led black leaders to accuse the Navy of practicing Jim Crow. Despite its goal of recruiting 14,000 volunteers in the first year, blacks never made up more than 5 percent of the entire Navy.

Black women also came to the defense of the nation by enlisting in the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC). Black women in WAAC were labeled "ten percenters" because they made up 10 percent of the women recruited. Like black men in the Armed Forces, they were placed in segregated units, lived in segregated housing, ate at segregated tables in the mess hall, and received segregated training. Although black WAAC officers received officer cadet training in integrated units, all other aspects of life in the corps were segregated. More than 6,200 black women served in WAAC. In spite of serving in segregated units and facing harsh discrimination, black women served with distinction.

Although African Americans supported their government during WWII, they were not silent about racial practices in America. In fact, some even noted the similarities between the way Jews were treated in Germany and the way blacks were treated in America. The poet Langston Hughes, for example, expressed this sentiment in his piece "Nazi and Dixie Nordics."

"The Germans are the victims of a mass psychosis," says an American sociologist. "It will take drastic



Battery B, 338th Antiaircraft Artillery, ca. 1943, detail. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

measures to control them when peace comes." These people were talking about Germany. To a Negro, they might just as well have been speaking of white Southerners in Dixie. Our local Nordics have a mass psychosis too, when it comes to race. As the Hitlerites treat the Jews, so they treat the Negroes, in varying degrees of viciousness ranging from the denial of educational opportunities to the denial of employment, from buses that pass Negroes by to jailers who beat and torture Negro prisoners, from the denial of the ballot to the denial of the right to live.

Hughes, like millions of African Americans, was fully conscious of the gap between the stated ideals of the United States and its practices at home. African Americans were also aware that the war created an opportunity to press US leaders for full citizenship.

DOUBLE V CAMPAIGN

The *Pittsburgh Courier*, one of the nation's largest black newspapers, stepped to the forefront in the struggle for racial equality by launching its "Double V" campaign. Responding to a January 31, 1942, letter to the editor by James G. Thompson of Wichita, Kansas, urging for a double V campaign, the paper published two interlocking Vs with the theme "Democracy: Victory at home, Victory Abroad" in its February 7, 1942, edition. The major objective of the campaign was to encourage blacks to support the war effort but fight for civil rights. The *Courier's* advocacy of patriotism was in part to prevent critics from accusing it of pushing its own agenda ahead of the nation's objective.

According to the *Courier* the response to the introduction of its campaign was "overwhelming." Its office had been swamped with telegrams and letters of support proving that its slogan represented the "true battle cry of Colored Americans" and that they were determined to protect their nation and the freedoms that they cherished. It argued that African Americans would wage a "two-pronged attack" against those who would enslave us "at home and those who abroad would enslave us. WE HAVE A STAKE IN THIS FIGHT . . . WE ARE AMERICANS TOO!"

The Double V campaign became intertwined with popular culture. During the war, pinup models, usually glamorous movie stars considered sex symbols, were featured in magazines, postcards, and newspapers. In its February 14, 1943, edition, the *Courier* also began to feature photos of pretty young women. Labeled the "Double V girl," the young women were college educated, were usually artistically talented, and were in support of the campaign. In addition to using glamorous women to attract supporters for its campaign, the paper also had photos of people dressed in the Double V fashion wear such as Double V dresses and Double V hats.

Besides the photos of the Double V Girls and Double V fashion, the *Courier* used numerous photos of whites standing alongside African Americans, emphasizing the point that the struggle for democracy was not a black issue but one that benefited the nation. The photos of blacks and whites flashing the Double V were to drive home the point that a unified country was essential for winning the war. Therefore, it urged the country not only preach democracy to the world but to practice it at home.

The Double V campaign was eventually adopted by other black newspapers, including the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, the *Washington Tribune*, and the *Challenger* of Columbus, Ohio. Despite the *Courier's* effort, by 1943, the paper provided less space in promoting the campaign and by September 1945 the paper stopped using Double V. Although the *Courier* could not claim any concrete accomplishments, the Double V campaign helped provide a voice to Americans who wanted to protest racial discrimination and contribute to the war effort.

THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON CAMPAIGN

Another crucial way that African Americans took advantage of America's involvement in WWII to push for civil rights was through mass protest. When Nazi Germany began invading and occupying countries in Europe, American industries began contracting with the government to increase production of ships, tanks, guns, and other items for defense. Despite the urgent need for tens of thousands of skilled workers to help in the production of these items, war production companies refused to hire blacks. Moreover, the federal government refused to take steps to end the racial discriminatory actions of these industries. In fact, the administration publicly announced that it would continue to segregate black and whites who enlisted in the armed services.

In response to the blatant discrimination on the part of industry and government, civil rights leader and labor organizer A. Philip Randolph launched the March on Washington Movement (MOWM), which helped organize thousands of people of African origin in the United States to march on the nation's capital in 1941, demanding that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt issue an executive order banning discrimination in the defense industry. The March on Washington Committee was organized and headed by Randolph and consisted of prominent black leaders such as Walter White of the NAACP and Lester Granger of the Urban League. Although Eleanor Roosevelt met with Randolph and White to convince them to call off the march, Randolph refused, insisting that the President agree to ban discrimination in the defense industry. The threat of thousands of black people coming to Washington, DC, to protest convinced FDR to hold a meeting with Randolph and other march leaders in June 1941. Although the president attempted to convince Randolph to call off the march, Randolph refused unless an executive order was issued.

Eventually, FDR agreed that his close ally Mayor Fiorello La Guardia of New York, and others associated with the White House, work out a compromise with Randolph. The compromise was Executive Order 8802, which banned employment discrimination in defense industry and government. FDR also created a temporary Fair Employment Practices Committee to help ensure that defense manufacturers would not practice racial discrimination. Because of a major victory in forcing the government to take action against discrimination for the first time since Reconstruction, Randolph agreed to call off the march.

Randolph and the march organizers had won a major victory for racial equality and had laid the groundwork for the civil rights protests of the 1950s and 1960s.

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SUGGESTED SOURCES

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Birnbaum, Jonathan, and Clarence Taylor. *Civil Rights since 1787: A Reader on the Black Struggle*. New York: New York University Press, 2000.

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ganizations . . . to provide for the full and equitable participation of all workers in defense industries, without discrimination because of race, creed, color, or national origin." His order also established the Committee on Fair Employment Practices to investigate complaints of discrimination and take appropriate steps to redress valid grievances.⁷²

The march was canceled. Black munitions worker Margaret Wright recalled that it was only Randolph's threat of a march on Washington that "made Roosevelt give this proclamation, because no one does anything — you never get anything — out of the goodness of people's hearts."⁷³

But Roosevelt's new policy was designed for failure. In its first year of operation, the FEPC had but seven field officers and five clerical workers, with a budget of only \$80,000. Even after the committee's personnel were increased, its budget totaled only \$431,609, far below the funding allocated to other government departments.

Moreover, Roosevelt's FEPC had no teeth to enforce equal employment. According to a federal government report, blacks were complaining that the FEPC had "no power to penalize violators of the non-discrimination order," and that the committee's hearings were merely "a token of the government's wish to rectify the situation, rather than an actual solution of the problem."⁷⁴ In *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, George E. DeMar pointed out that Roosevelt's "Executive Order was accepted as policy, but all too often not for practice, by those holding war contracts."⁷⁵ In "An Open Letter to President Roosevelt — An Editorial," the *Crisis* impatiently informed the President that in too many communities "your Executive Order 8802 was being defied and sabotaged by management and labor alike."⁷⁶

Knowing that the government would not interfere with war production and that the FEPC had neither the power nor the will to desegregate, white laborers resisted the federal government's efforts to integrate the war industries. In 1943, for example, twenty thousand white workers rioted to protest the upgrading of black

welders in the Alabama Dry Dock and Shipbuilders Company. After federal troops intervened, the FEPC agreed to allow segregation to continue in the shipyards.

Ultimately, the real pressure for employment integration came from the sheer need for labor in America's booming war industries. Almost 1 million African Americans entered the industrial labor force during the war years. At the beginning of 1942, only 3 percent of defense workers were black; by November 1944, that number had jumped to 8.3 percent. Blacks constituted 25 percent of the labor force in foundries and 12 percent in shipbuilding and steel mills.⁷⁷ They also entered employment in the auto industry. In 1943, 55,000 of the 450,000 members of Detroit's United Auto Workers were African Americans. During the war years, the wages of black families increased from 40 percent to 60 percent of that of white families.⁷⁸

Pulled by job opportunities in the war industries, over a half million African Americans left the South. During the decade of the 1940s, the percentage of blacks living in the South declined from 77 percent to 68 percent. Following the jobs to the cities, blacks classified as urban dwellers increased from 49 percent to 62 percent. They migrated, again as they had during World War I, to the Midwestern cities like Chicago and Detroit. But this time, they also went to California, where they found war-related jobs in Los Angeles, Oakland, Richmond, and San Francisco. "I came to California in 1943," recalled Ella Johnson. "The shipyard people came to Louisiana offering \$1.20 an hour to work in California. I'd work for as little as 25 cents an hour, 50 cents an hour, and thinking I was doing pretty good. Had I ever seen a ship? I imagine I had not. I didn't even know what a ship looked like. But they were hiring, so we went."⁷⁹

STOP HERE

As a teenager living in San Francisco at the time, Maya Angelou witnessed the movement of blacks into the Fillmore District, which had been inhabited by Japanese Americans until their evacuation and internment. "As the Japanese disappeared, soundlessly and without protest," she wrote in her autobiography, "the Ne-